



## **War, Bodies and Futurist Science in Enif Robert's and Filippo**

### **Tommaso Marinetti's *Un ventre di donna***

Enif Robert's and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's Futurist novel *Un ventre di donna* (*A Woman's Womb*) offers fertile ground to explore profound transformations in the making of female identity in Italy during and after World War One, particularly in relation to developments in technology and new scientific trends.<sup>1</sup> While examining these aspects in the novel, I start with the assumption that identity is a fluid entity embodied in textual representation, either reflecting or resisting the cultural practices and power relations of a gendered individual in a specific place and at a specific time.<sup>2</sup>

Before focusing on *Un ventre di donna*, however, I would like to remind readers of a few relevant aspects concerning the Italian avant-garde movement of which this work is representative, in order to contextualize it. As is well known, Marinetti founded Futurism in 1909, when he published his first manifesto in the French newspaper *Le Figaro*. Principle number 9, for example, provocatively praises warfare and virile action when it says: "We want to glorify the war—the only hygiene in the world—militarism, patriotism, [...] and scorn for woman."<sup>3</sup> Principle number 4 underlines the relevance of technology and its relation to Futurist art: "a racing car whose hood is adorned with great pipes, like serpents of explosive breath [...] is more beautiful than the *Victory of*

*Samothrace*.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, what is fast, technological, reproducible and impersonal is more appealing than unrepeatable traditional art aiming at enhancing humanistic values. Consequently, Enif Robert as a woman, who a few years later embraced Futurism and agreed to co-author her novel with Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, had to create her literary niche and narrate her story within a dimension that was pervaded by aggressive nationalism, triumphant virile overtones and a dehumanizing, powerful technology.<sup>5</sup>

The novel *Un ventre di donna* was published in 1919, immediately after World War I, and reports the adventures of the autobiographical *persona* Enif, who has a sick womb and who accepts, more or less reluctantly, all kinds of cures in order to heal it, including a hysterectomy. Initially she resorts to traditional medical methods but to no avail. Later, however, after following Marinetti’s advice, she begins Futurist treatment and her improvement is sudden and tangible. In the background one can see the sufferings of the Italian nation at war, which at times is compared to a generic feminine body and other times to Enif’s body. The Italian body, like that of Enif, is cured through various treatments, including bombing, which is represented as a type of surgical procedure. In the end, the restoration of the nation to health corresponds to Italian victory. The parallels between Enif and Italy are thus striking.

For a deeper understanding of the text, it should also be added that, although most of the novel was written by Enif Robert, it was approved and endorsed by Marinetti in the introduction, and includes some of his letters to Enif that he wrote when he was fighting in the trenches. Moreover, in the text, the fictional Enif is an aspiring writer, and she will

find her unique literary voice only when she accepts Marinetti's Futurist artistic rules, along with medical treatment.

What I find relevant in this novel is that the most detailed and recurrent representations of bodies are used to represent the identity of women and the nation, and not of men. In addition, bodies are sick and need to be cured and empowered through the help of medical sciences or new technological devices. But who are the individuals who can prescribe a cure? There are the traditional medical doctors in the beginning, Dottor Freschi and the *Professore*, who are men, and there is Marinetti, who promotes Futurist medicine for the benefit of humanity, and who uses new weapons for the victory of his nation. Finally, the authority of literary representation is conferred upon women by men. Marinetti approves Enif's novel and teaches her new techniques, enabling her to enter the Futurist literary *koinè*.

It is therefore apparent that a dominant androcentric hierarchical system gradually takes shape. Marinetti, like other Futurist men, is at the top of this hierarchy. He is well informed and engaged in new scientific discoveries through his Futurist research. He controls technology, as in the story he knows how to use new weapons during the war, and is not affected by the destructive power of enemy fire. Moreover, he is the creator of a new art reflecting a utopian, perpetually regenerating, technological society. The traditional medical doctors are placed under him. They master a type of scientific knowledge that appears to be obsolete and not too effective. Enif, in fact, has only temporary relief with their cure. At the bottom of this system are women. Some minor

female characters that appear in the chapter “Lotta di ventri femminili” (“Fight of Female Wombs”), including a mother with a “ventre stanco” (“tired womb”, 204) because of her too many children, and a too erudite woman with a “ventre isterico” (“hysterical womb”, 202), have no other choice than to accept their subaltern role: the mother for never having been engaged in the public sphere, and the erudite woman for having disassociated her intellect from her instincts, thus depriving herself of a fulfilling private life. Enif’s position is more complex. She belongs to the same space that other women occupy in that she needs the guidance of men to take control of her body and to take control of her mind. Yet her desire to become a Futurist woman, and her efforts to enhance and renovate her body and mind through Futurist science and literature, distinguish her from other women and leads her to challenge the rules initially dictated by men.

Enif’s more evident efforts of resisting, or at times contradictorily absorbing androcentric rules and traits in an attempt to dominate them, appear in the chapters regarding her correspondence with Marinetti. In these chapters everything comes together: her acceptance of the new sciences, her boldest literary experimentations, and her transformation into a new woman. Initially she empowers herself through a gradual virilization; then she transcends this virilization by believing in the possibility of transforming herself into an asexual super-human individual. In this final phase, her desire to go beyond human limits is expressed through the release of supernatural energy. In this final phase, her desire to become posthuman is expressed through her release of supernatural powers that will enable her to transform herself into an entity of

unprecedented mental and physical power, and, ultimately, might lead her to immortality.<sup>6</sup>

All of this begins when Marinetti, in one of his letters, invites Enif to abandon traditional medical cures and to devote herself to the reading of his “therapeutic manual of desire-imagination.”<sup>7</sup> This manual recommends that sick people use their will power and imagination to build “a sort of typical and personal paradise,”<sup>8</sup> and that they convince themselves that they will indeed heal. After her reading of the manual, Enif appears to be fully energized. She chooses to be operated on immediately with new medical techniques and, after the operation, when she is recovering, her enhanced creativity enables her to impersonate a soldier who is fighting for Italian victory. In other words, if she can heal her womb, through the power of her imagination, she will also be able to transform herself into a fighting man and heal her nation’s womb. If she becomes an invigorated, virile woman, Italy will become a renovated, undefeatable modern nation.

In this part of the text, Enif declares she wants to draft a new Futurist volume that will describe her operation and will be titled *Sensazioni chirurgiche (Surgical Sensations)*. A fragment of this new volume then follows. This fragment, an example of Futurist words in freedom, interrupts the linear narrative prevailing in the novel *Un ventre di donna*. Here, the referential function of the language is disrupted by the prevalence of analogies and visual signs. For example, in order to describe the giddiness preceding the loss of consciousness due to anesthesia, and in order to represent the beginning of a depersonalizing, regenerative process, Enif Robert draws a big spiral with the verb in the

infinite “to whirl” above it in a semi-circle.<sup>9</sup> At this point, the protagonist rejects old empirical science. She fully accepts new Futurist science to create a supersensible dimension enabling her to transcend, if only with her imagination, the dichotomy between what is physical and what is mental, what is female and what is male, what is temporal and what is perennial, and finally what is human and what is non-human.

The cultural roots of Enif’s regenerative desires may be found in the principles presented in the manifesto of Futurist science of 1916 signed by various avant-garde representatives, including Arnaldo Ginna, Bruno Corra and Emilio Settimelli.<sup>10</sup> In a wider European context, points of correspondence may also be seen in eugenic and naturist trends, which Marinetti and other Futurists explicitly embraced in 1934, through the creation of the Movimento dei Gruppi Futuristi Naturisti. As is well-known, eugenic theories explored the human hereditary traits and the ways to improve them (theories that in the years of the big European dictatorships were then used to justify abhorrent racist measures). Naturist writing, instead, invited people to recover energy and health through an appreciation of the body and the return to a simpler and more natural life style.

In this short paper, however, I only develop the link between Enif’s healing strategies and the principles presented in the manifesto of Futurist science in detail. In the manifesto, written with clear nationalistic tones, the empirical science taught by German professors appears no longer to be valid, as it dissects reality and is “superficially precise” and “deprived of any ingenious explosion.”<sup>11</sup> In the novel, Enif rejects traditional empirical science on the same grounds, even if she does not mention its German origin. Again in

the manifesto, Futurist science, which encapsulates the Italian ingenious spirit and promotes the rejuvenation of the Italian race, leads to a new holistic approach through the re-evaluation of an extra-sensorial dimension. This new science, as the manifesto says, enhances the powers of the mind, and explores “that less sounded side of [...] reality that includes mediumistic phenomena, psychism, rhabdomancy, divining and telepathy.”<sup>12</sup> In the novel, Enif seems to put into practice this point of the manifesto when she resorts to the powers of her mind to heal her body and transcend her human nature.

The autobiographical Enif thus employs elements of the new scientific discourse to represent a complex empowered female individual. As we have seen, at times this individual dominates her personal history, and figuratively the history of her nation, while ambivalently absorbing some virile traits that leave unaltered the binary code of femininity and masculinity of an androcentric institution. In so doing, Enif fits well in that group of female representations of the avant garde that other critics have likewise conceived as the virile women of Futurism.<sup>13</sup> At other times, however, the autobiographical Enif goes beyond that representation. She seems to enter an extra-sensorial dimension in which she dominates time and space. It is at these times that she erases gender boundaries and achieves her ultimate desire of transcending her humanity and becoming part of perpetually regenerating matter. In many ways, her last transformation recalls that of the new mechanical man described by Marinetti in his essay “L’uomo moltiplicato e il regno della macchina” of 1915, in which new individuals will become in part machines.<sup>14</sup> By giving vent to their vital energy, they will overcome

disease, pain and death. In Marinetti's exceptional man, however, unlike the Enif character, the technological side is stressed.<sup>15</sup>

In concluding I return to my initial point to ask what Futurist literary representations of identity reveal about a historical moment anticipating Fascism in Italy.<sup>16</sup> Why do Futurist literary *personae* have an apparently blind optimism? They extol technology, they accept spirituality, they support a loud nationalistic and virile agenda, but then they avoid a sense of death and decline, and they erase gender and cultural diversity. It seems to me that Futurist literary representations, starting from those in the novel I have analyzed, are part of a new mythology, in which fears, anxieties and desires can be appeased. The grand dream of never-ending power that sustains this Futurist mythology may be nothing other than a reaction in a historical moment that was marked by a devastating world war and a profound societal change; a historical moment that was also characterized by astonishing scientific discoveries and by advances in technology that Italy had never seen before.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper originates from the rethinking of ideas developed in my article written in Italian “Il testo, il corpo e la cultura futurista: riflessioni sul romanzo *Un ventre di donna*,” *Quaderni del Novecento*, 5 (2005): 11-23. It also anticipates some ideas that will be exposed in a section of my book in progress, whose working title is *Posthuman Desires: Futurist Women in Florence*.

<sup>2</sup> In taking this position, I have in mind Antonio Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony, according to which ruling groups of society maintain their power and leave their values unaltered when they obtain the spontaneous consensus of other groups [*Quaderni del carcere*, 1, ed. Valentino Cerreta (Torino: Einaudi, 1977), 42]. I also draw upon Michel Foucault, when he states that societies may be conceived as systems of power relations, and that circulating discourse reflects these. Consequently, language can prompt the reproduction of an existing system, but it can also become an instrument of critique and resistance [*Power / Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, trans. Colin Gordon et al., ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 83]. Finally, I am taking into account a recurrent point in feminist theory: gender is a social category that is conditioned by power relations manifested in society.

<sup>3</sup> Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, “Fondazione e manifesto del Futurismo” (Feb. 20, 1909), in *Teoria ed invenzione futurista*, ed. Luciano De Maria (Milano: Mondadori, 1968), 10; “Noi vogliamo glorificare la guerra—sola igiene del mondo—il militarismo, il patriottismo [...] e il disprezzo della donna.” (From now on, all translations of the original Italian into English in the body of the text are mine). In regard to the expression “scorn for woman,” it should be added that, on later occasions, Marinetti explained that the scorn was only directed to traditional women.

<sup>4</sup> Marinetti, “Fondazione ...,” 10; “un automobile ruggente, che sembra correre sulla mitraglia [...] è più bello della *Vittoria di Samotracia*” [sic].

<sup>5</sup> Enif Robert’s peculiar position in a male dominated avant-garde movement is also noted by Cinzia Sartini Blum, *The Other Modernism: F.T. Marinetti’s Futurist Fiction of Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Enif Robert’s work, like that of other Futurist women, may be conceived as an early contribution to the current dialogue on the posthuman condition. To mention only a few studies on this topic, one might recall Massimo Lollini, ed., *Humanism, Posthumanism, Neohumanism, Annali d’Italianistica*, 26 (2008); Bruce

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Clarke, *Posthuman Metamorphosis. Narrative and Systems* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008) and Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston, eds., *Posthuman Bodies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Enif Robert, *Un ventre di donna* (Milano: Facchi, 1919), 163; “manuale terapeutico del desiderio-immaginazione.”

<sup>8</sup> Marinetti and Robert, *Un ventre*, 163; “una specie di paradiso tipico e personale.”

<sup>9</sup> Marinetti and Robert, *Un ventre*, 136; “turbinare.”

<sup>10</sup> Bruno Corra et al., “La scienza futurista,” *L'Italia Futurista*, 1, 2 (June 15, 1916): 1-2.

<sup>11</sup> Bruno Corra et al., “La scienza futurista,” 1; “superficialmente precisa”; “priva di qualsiasi esplosione geniale.”

<sup>12</sup> Bruno Corra et al., “La scienza futurista,” 2; “quella zona meno scandagliata della [...] realtà che comprende i fenomeni del medianismo, dello psichismo, della raddomanzia, della divinazione, della telepatia.”

<sup>13</sup> The enhanced virile traits of Futurist female *personae* are noted in several studies, including Silvia Contarini, *Femme futuriste: mythes, modèles, et représentations de la femme dans la théorie et la littérature futuristes (1909-1919)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Paris 10, 2006); Rita Guerricchio, “Il modello della donna futurista,” *Donne e politica*, 6, 35-36 (August-October, 1976): 35-37; Ida Mitrano, “Il ruolo della donna nella ricostruzione dell’universo futurista,” *Terzo occhio*, 14 (December 1988): 39-41; Anna Nozzoli, *Tabù e coscienza. La condizione femminile nella letteratura italiana del Novecento* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1978): 41-64; Graziella Parati, “The Transparent Woman. Reading Femininity Within a Futurist Context,” in *Feminine Feminists*, ed. Robin Pickering-Iazzi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995): 43-61; Lucia Re, “Futurism and Feminism,” *Annali d’Italianistica*, 7 (1989): 253-272; Claudia Salaris, *Le futuriste. Donne e letteratura d’avanguardia in Italia (1909-1944)* (Milano: Edizioni delle Donne, 1982); Cinzia Sartini Blum, *The Other Modernism...*; Barbara Spackman, *Fascist Virility. Rethoric, Ideology, and Social Fantasy in Italy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996): 35-48.

<sup>14</sup> Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, “Guerra sola igiene del mondo” (1915), in *Teoria ed invenzione...*, 199-293.

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<sup>15</sup> The genalogy of Marinetti's mechanical man is well traced in Marja Härmänmaa, *Un patriota che sfidò la decadenza. F.T. Marinetti e l'idea dell'uomo nuovo fascista, 1929-1944* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2000): 280-286.

<sup>16</sup> I am aware that Italian Futurism cannot be simplistically associated with Fascism, and in this I am in agreement with other scholars who point out the wide spectrum of the Futurists' political choices, among them Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics. Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944* (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1996).